

Fifth Sunday of Lent
March 9, 2008

Introduction

The Gospel reading for this 5th Sunday of Lent - the raising of Lazarus - always annoys me! Actually, it's not the story itself but the fact that it's cut off before it should be. We don't get, in the words of radio commentator, Paul Harvey, "the rest of the story".

Listen, then, to what happens after what we just heard proclaimed from John's Gospel.

I

"Many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary and had seen what [Jesus] did believed in him, but some of them went to tell the Pharisees what Jesus had done. Then the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting. 'Here is this man working all these signs', they said, 'and what action are we taking? If we let him go on in this way everybody will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy the Holy Place and our nation.' One of them, Caiaphas, the high priest that year, said, 'You don't seem to have grasped the situation at all; you fail to see that it is better for one man to die for the people, than for the whole nation to be destroyed'. He did not speak in his own person; it was as high priest that he made this prophecy that Jesus was to die for the nation - and not for the nation only, but to gather together in unity the scattered children of God. From that day they were determined to kill him." (Jn 11:45-53)

We have here a clear, political determination: better for one man to die than for the Romans to come and sweep away the Jewish nation. Jesus was considered a serious threat to the status quo of his time and place.

II

The Church has been giving us daily readings to this effect as we move through our Lenten journey toward Holy Week. Tomorrow, for example, we will have the story of the woman caught in the very act of adultery (not the man who was with her, by the way) and Jesus' challenging her accusers about who should throw the first stone at her. On Tuesday we'll have another of those verbal conflicts between Jesus and those who considered themselves true believers. And so on.

It seems the the Church wants to emphasize for us the clear breach between Jesus and the socio-political-religious power structure of his nation. That is why I get so annoyed that today's Gospel is cut off just as it is getting to one of the real points of the story.

III

How does all of this affect us here 20 centuries later?

I would suggest one overriding consideration: are we considered serious threats to the current status quo? or to put it in the terms of an oft-asked question: if we were accused of being true followers of Christ would we be found guilty?

These are appropriate questions for this time and this place. We find ourselves beginning the last two weeks of Lent, 2008. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and then Holy Week, our "high holy days". Tomorrow evening in our parish we shall come together for a communal service of Reconciliation, wherein the community in a public and formal way acknowledges our need for God's mercy. (I cannot urge us more strongly to participate in this action, even if one does not choose to make a personal, private confession of sin. It is our parish, our community that tomorrow evening will stand together begging for God's pardon and mercy in our names and in the name of our society and world.)

At this time in our history the war in Iraq grinds on, nearing its fifth anniversary.

Today's New York Times reports that the President has just refused to uphold a ban on waterboarding.

Those campaigning for high office in our land tends to pander to the self-interest of the already privileged in our society.

There is still a serious lack of prophetic voices in most of our churches and synagogues.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion let me cite the words of Jesus as he was taking leave of his disciples - and us - after his resurrection from the dead. He said to them, as he says to us, "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1-8) The question is: are we.